

BABEŞ – BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
ECUMENE DOCTORAL SCHOOL

DOCTORAL THESIS

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Cluj-Napoca

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**The cult of the Virgin Mary in Transylvania in the context of the cultic
representations in Șumuleu Ciuc and Cluj**

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SUMMARY

In Transylvania, there are numerous objects dedicated to the Virgin Mary. There is no Roman Catholic church in the Archdiocese of Alba Iulia that does not have at least one representation of the Virgin Mary. Among these, miraculous images of the Virgin Mary are particularly prominent.

In a work entitled "A Short Description of the Images of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Hungarian Country and the Parts Belonging to it", summarizing the history of the shrines in Hungary, published in Bratislava in 1836 by Elek Jordánszky, canon of Bratislava, there are two mentions of such images in Transylvania: the statue of Our Lady of Help at Şumuleu Ciuc / Csíksomlyó and the icon of the Our Lady of Tears at Cluj / Kolozsvár. The ecclesiastical recognition of the miraculous nature of both of the two representations was confirmed by the Transylvanian Bishop Ignatius Batthyány in September 1798.

Although the two images (icon /statue) belong to different types of art objects, have different iconographic characteristics, were created at different times with different techniques, and they also have different contexts of reception, it is still possible to describe them together.

The statue of the Virgin at Şumuleu Ciuc was created in the first quarter of the 16th century. It bears the characteristics of the Late Gothic - Early Renaissance and it is a representation of the *Woman Clothed with the Sun (Mulier amicta sole)*. Carved from maple wood, painted and gilded, the statue (210 cm high, 253 cm with her wooden crown) was once part of a polyptych winged altarpiece. The structure and origin of the medieval altar are unknown. The statue has been mentioned in written sources since the second half of the 17th century. Since then, the presence of the statue of the Virgin Mary at Şumuleu has been associated with a number of miracles, which have been recorded and bequeathed by Franciscan historians for some four centuries. In addition to an art-historical analysis of the statue of the Virgin of Şumuleu Ciuc and a presentation of the iconographic characteristics of the *Woman Clothed in the Sun*, I have also summarised the related liturgical objects.

The icon of Cluj is a *Hodegetria*-type representation of the Mother of God. A similar depiction, painted in 1681 by the Master Luca from Iclod, can be presently found in the orthodox church of Nicula. The icon of Cluj, discussed in this thesis, was originally located in the same village, Nicula, in the former Greek Catholic wooden church, where it was seen weeping in 1699. Thereafter the fate of the icon is obscure. In their chronicles written about the painting, the Jesuits of Cluj reported that the original weeping icon had been brought to Cluj after an investigation into the miracle, with the permission of Cardinal Leopold Kollonics. However, it cannot be claimed with certainty that this icon, which can still be seen on the main altar of the Jesuit church in Cluj, completed in 1724, is indeed the work of Master Luca and that it is undoubtedly identical with one that had been weeping in the old church of Nicula. Especially that the beforementioned, similar icon of the Mother of God, located in the church of Nicula, looks more similar to further icons attributed to Master Luca (the icons of Ilișua and the monastery of Strâmba).

The icon of the Mother of God in Nicula, created in the second half of the 17th century (1681), as well as its variant in Cluj - regardless of which one was originally weeping - have both become symbols of the cult of Virgin Mary in Transylvania and both have a potential for interconfessional connections. We have previously explored in more details the origins and the confessional aspects of these weeping icons in our studies written together with art historian, museologist Ana Dumitran, previously in 2011. In the present PhD thesis, I have examined the Cluj version of the weeping icon, exploring its multiple copies in various Roman Catholic churches in Transylvania.

I thought it was important to discuss the statue of Șumuleu Ciuc, the icon of Cluj and their multiple variants together, in order to better understand the diverse manifestations of the veneration of Virgin Mary and the role of these visual representations within the development and evolution of the cult in Transylvania.

I have retrieved the relevant data concerning the tangible liturgical objects from the Register of Liturgical Objects of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Alba Iulia with the permission of the Archbishopric.

The statue of Șumuleu Ciuc, the icon of Cluj and their copies are presented separately in the catalogues accompanying the thesis. I have expanded the collection of objects related to the icon and the sculpture, and have provided more information on the copies previously known to exist. In some cases, I have clarified the dating of the images (pictures / sculptures). The large number of objects (about 138 copies of images and 672 votive objects) provides a baseline for the study of the prevalence of cultic images in Transylvania.

The cultic nature of the objects implied an understanding of the Oriental and Latin ecclesiastical traditions of veneration of images (icons and images of saints) and of the Church's teaching(s) on the veneration of Mary. The theological approaches to the worship of Mary underpinned the important role of that the Virgin Mary has in the creed, the liturgy and the devotion. On the other hand, the theological interpretations also indicate the different perceptions of Mary in the Eastern and Western Church(es). If we combine these Mariological teachings with the ecclesiastical traditions on the veneration of images - the origins of the cult of the image in the Church, the Oriental Church's interpretation of icons and the Latine Church's teaching on the veneration of images of the saints - we will discover a very complex ecclesiastical and theological background to the representations of Mary. From this overall picture, one cannot ignore the manifestations of popular devotion either, which reveal further temporal and spatial specificities of worship. The depictions of the Virgin Mary in Transylvania show the characteristics of art of altars in the Carpathian Basin and the Central-European Middle and Baroque Ages.

But altarpieces cannot be interpreted separated from the history of the region. Therefore, I considered it important to give a sense of the historical events that took place in Transylvania in the 16th-18th centuries, and of the development of social and ecclesiastical circumstances. In the light of the rise of the Reformation in Transylvania and the Catholic Revival, it is easier to understand why this heritage has survived in Transylvanian churches in such quantity and quality. As far as the images of Mary are concerned, I could not ignore the role of the Franciscans and Jesuits. The Franciscan and Jesuit missions in Transylvania during the 17th and 18th centuries contributed greatly to the revival of the veneration of the Virgin Mary in the modern era and to the establishment and consolidation of these two shrines.

The topic has been presented in an interdisciplinary approach, involving not only the disciplines of ecclesiastical art and theology, but also relevant research in religious ethnography, literary studies and church history. The data can be used for further observations, stylistic, iconographic, ecclesiastical-historical or liturgical analyses.

The peculiarity of the thesis is that I have discussed the veneration and the tangible memorial objects of the two cultic Transylvanian images of Virgin Mary together. The hypotheses formulated can be supported by a parallel and comparative study of the icon and the sculpture.

Hypothesis 1: The mediating role of religious images in Transylvania in the 18th-19th centuries can be evidenced. In the case of both of the two prominent images (icon/sculpture), the mediating role of the visual representation is asserted through the associated experiences - storytelling, encounter, offering, the hearing of prayers, donation - regardless of the actual type of representation.

The mediating role of the two significant Transylvanian depictions of Mary is not limited to the 18th-19th centuries, as the history of these paintings goes much further into the past. The statue of Virgin Mary at Șumuleu Ciuc dates back 500 years, having been carved in the first decades of the 16th century. It has played a significant role in Șumuleu Ciuc since the second half of the 17th century.

The mediating role of the statue of the Virgin of Șumuleu Ciuc is clearly reflected both in the Franciscan writings on the history of the Order and in the collective memory and manifestations of popular devotion (processions, private devotions, the custom of offering, other forms of image worship) that have been around for almost half a millennium. Testimonies dating back to the 18th century indicate that the statue of Mary was venerated as a miraculous statue where healings and other miracles were recorded. The Church's official recognition, provided by Bishop Ignatius Batthyány in 1798, confirmed the already existing religious experiences and practice. During the 19th century, the demolition of the medieval church was a result of the need to provide more space for the pilgrims, as the old church had become crowded. The main altar of the present church, built in the 19th century, was designed in such a way that the miraculous statue of the Virgin could be placed in the most prominent

position in the church, on a high pedestal in the middle of the sanctuary, where pilgrims could walk up to it, approach it and touch it. The mediating role of the statue is indicated by the large number of votive offerings, most of which can still be seen on either side of the statue. In the Archdiocese of Alba Iulia, the church of Șumuleu Ciuc has the largest number of votive objects.

The history of the weeping icon of Cluj began at the end of the 17th century, when the image was claimed to have shed tears (1699). Afterwards, its cult developed mainly during the 18th century. In this case, it was mainly members of the nobility connected to Cluj, who donated the votive objects. As an expression of gratitude, copies of the icon were also made. Most of the places where copies of the icon of Cluj can be found today, were once Catholic noble estates or had parish priest(s) who had been trained by the Jesuits in Cluj in the 18th century. The flourishing cult of the icon of Cluj in the 18th and 19th centuries was adversely affected and disrupted by social and ecclesiastical changes in the mid-20th century.

When discussing and evaluating cultic images, we must bear in mind that these depictions of Mary, in addition to their artistic value, also carry a centuries-old conceptual value.

The devotional images are of particular importance among the altarpieces located in churches (serving the liturgy) and the (prayer) images for private devotion. The believers are more aware of the mediating role of these icons and pass this experience on to future generations. Stories of the miraculous power of certain icons may survive for centuries, or the story of their origin may be linked to a miraculous event. They attract pilgrims and become places of worship. This is also observed in the case of the two studied representations of the Virgin Mary. And the copies of the icons show the expansiveness of the area of attraction of these shrines.

The mediating role of the statue of Șumuleu Ciuc is evidenced by the significant number of depictions of the Virgin Mary that can be associated with the statue and which I have presented in this thesis. The majority of the 18th-20th century representations of Mary, associated with the statue of Șumuleu Ciuc, have survived in Szeklerland.

This may also be due to the fact that the habitat of individuals and the community, as well as the area accessible to them were more limited in the past. However, from outside the borders of Szeklerland, pilgrims from Moldova also regularly returned to Şumuleu Ciuc, who had established a connection to the shrine through the missions of Franciscan friars. Today, this has changed a lot, due not only to the religious and ecclesiastical framework but also to the influence of socio-cultural factors.

However, it can be seen that the worship of Mary at Şumuleu Ciuc has developed in a similar manner to that at other European shrines. Noteworthy are those variants of statues or icons that have become veneration objects in their own environment. The need for copies of the statue of Şumuleu Ciuc is still alive, there are countless copies in current circulation. Although the latter reproductions are less valuable from an artistic point of view, it can be noted that any representation of Mary can have a mediating power. Cultic images can fulfil the role that icon theology had already articulated in the first centuries of Christianity, that of mediator between the visible earthly world, humans and the invisible divinity and the holy.

In the Archdiocese of Alba Iulia, after the statue of Şumuleu Ciuc, the second largest number of donations were made to the icon in Cluj. Many votive objects have survived in the collection of the University Church of Cluj. Numerous copies of the Weeping Icon have also been made, mainly in the 18th century, several of which became devotional images themselves, as attested by the offerings on or around the icon. The iconic character of the image has a mediating role in theological terms. Today, relatively few people visit this shrine.

Hypothesis 2: Friars have made a significant contribution to the ecclesiastical recognition of devotional statues/icons and the development of shrines in Transylvania. The missionary activities of the Observant Franciscans and the Jesuits in Transylvania in the 17th and 18th centuries were also supported by the Transylvanian Catholic noble families.

The icons played an important role in the Catholic mission in Transylvania and in the preservation of Hungarian identity. Through the history of both representations, and through the associated physical objects, the process of iconification and the spread of the cult can be

perceived. In this process, the influence of the evolution of religious and social conditions in Transylvania (from the mid-16th century to the present day) can also be identified. In my analysis, I have stressed that the friars contributed significantly to the development of the cult.

At Șumuleu Ciuc, since the time of Johannes Kajoni, Franciscan historians have not only narrated and retold the origins of the statue, but also chronicled the miracles, sometimes recording the prayer requests and donations related to certain individuals. Among the donators were several Catholic noble families. In Șumuleu-Ciuc, during the 17th century, donations were made mainly by members of the Apor, Kálnoki, Mikes, Haller, Csáki, Bánffi, Mikola, Petki, Torma and Cserei families. The study of the miraculous nature of the statue and the church processes of the 18th century helped to record several testimonies of personal prayers and miraculous recoveries from illnesses. The large number of votive offerings visible next to the shrine also testifies to the miraculous happenings at the shrine.

In Cluj, the Jesuits consciously built the cult of the weeping icon: they mentioned it in their sermons, recorded the history of its origin, published a history of the icon in their printing houses, produced and distributed engravings of the it. It is likely that the commissioned copies of the painted versions were also ordered by Jesuits or Jesuit-educated priests and Catholic nobles who had studied at the Jesuit College and Academy in Cluj.

The role of Count Zsigmond Kornis, the governor of Cluj and his descendants, as well as the Haller, Apor, Jósika and Szentkereszty noble families, is outstanding in the spreading of the cult of the icon of Cluj. In addition to donations, they contributed to making copies of the image of the Weeping Virgin of Cluj, which became known throughout Transylvania in the 18th century. In some places, the copies of the icon became cultic images themselves, as the votives on and around the images attest.

The veneration of the two Transylvanian cult images of Mary developed in a similar way during the 18th and 19th centuries, and even in the first half of the 20th century. However, during the Communist period, only one Piarist monk remained in Cluj to serve the church.

Although the monastery in Șumuleu Ciuc was also nationalised, and one or two Franciscans were allowed to work in the shrine, the believers did not stay away from the shrine despite the bans and other repressive measures. Regardless of the ban on community celebrations and pilgrimages, in the 1980's, believers came to Șumuleu Ciuc even from Moldova. Since the 1990's, the number of people coming to the Pentecost Pilgrimage, which was relaunched by the Franciscans, has been increasing. The (hundreds of) thousands of pilgrims now come not only from Szeklerland, but also from further regions.

In 1899, on the 200th anniversary of year when the icon of Cluj shed tears (1699), the Bishop of Transylvania entrusted the diocese of historic Transylvania and its inhabitants to the heavenly patronage of Our Lady of Tears in Cluj. However, only archival sources bear witness to this event, and other manifestations of veneration have also declined since then.

However, the monastery church of Nicula, with its own weeping icon, is visited by many believers, especially on the day of the Assumption of Mary.

In the last three decades, the veneration of cultic images of Mary has tended to revive and attract crowds in those shrines where pastoral service and the administration of the sacraments are continuous. However, research on these is beyond the scope of this paper.

Hypothesis 3: these representations of Mary are expressive of the art and spirituality of a given period. New interpretations are added to the older depictions over time.

Based on the art historical and conservation studies of the statue of Mary at Șumuleu Ciuc, the researchers' consensus is that the statue of Mary was created in the first quarter of the 16th century. Other medieval altarpieces from this period that have survived in Transylvania prove that the statue of Șumuleu Ciuc fits into the style of late medieval altarpiece art and bears the iconographic characteristics of the period, the iconography of the *Woman Clothed with the Sun*.

The objects related to the statue of the Virgin of Șumuleu Ciuc also show that from a stylistic point of view they fit into the main artistic trends of the period,

following mainly the 18th-19th century style. A characteristic feature of the copies is that they modify certain elements or the use of colours compared to the original statue, adapting them to the needs of the specific period. This has also led to the creation of representations of Mary that combine several types (the *Woman Clothed with the Sun*, *Immaculata* or the *Immaculate Heart of Mary*, etc.).

Numerous engravings and paintings on canvas, as well as reliefs carved in stone, have been made based on the *Hodegetria*-style icon in Cluj. The reproductions are largely modelled based on 18th century engravings. Exceptions are two *ronde bosse* sculptures (a full-length and a bust), where the planar representation is replaced by a three-dimensional shape. The stone reliefs were originally placed externally on the façades of buildings, outside the church, and were given a protective role.

The comparison of the two Transylvanian representations complements our knowledge of the Transylvanian phenomena and characteristics of the cult of Virgin Mary. Interdisciplinary research on this topic can complement existing disciplinary findings and may contribute to a more complete understanding of the cult of Virgin Mary in Transylvania.